

# Love Music, Hate Racism

*Rock Against Racism Live. 1977-1981*, Syd Shelton (32pp, Café Royal Books)

*Syd Shelton: Rock Against Racism 1976-1981*, eds. Carol Tulloch and Mark Sealy (187pp, Rare Bird Books)

Back in the 1970s, as unemployment rose and wages fell, there was a right wing backlash against immigration. So much so that by the middle of the decade the National Front had become a serious threat in party politics, and racism was openly practiced and an everyday occurrence. Graffiti encouraged 'blacks', 'pakis' and 'wogs' to 'go back home', often accompanied by swastikas, whilst the streets in poorer areas of many cities turned into spaces for beatings, fights, abuse and shouting matches. If you want to be kind you can talk about the confusion of nationalism and racism, patriotism and separatism, or about immigration policy and the fear of unchecked immigration, but I don't want to be kind. This was mob paranoia, mass ignorance and racism, and the National Front were intent on using that, stirring things up and getting into power. They recycled and repeated Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech [1], and spread the lies and misinformation that we now know as the Great Replacement theory [2]. It was a particularly successful message in working class areas where jobs were disappearing as industry declined.

It wasn't of course, as clear-cut as this seems. As Mark Sealy says in his 'Introduction' to *Syd Shelton: Rock Against Racism 1976-1981*, it was

one of the most intriguing and contradictory political periods in post World War II British history. A time when racist skinheads danced to Jamaican ska, punks embraced reggae and Black kids reached out to punk. Meanwhile disaffected white Britain turned to rightwing politics [...] (Sealy 2022: 11)

For some music fans things came to a head in August 1976, 'when Eric Clapton made a sickening drunken declaration of support for Enoch Powell (the racist former Tory minister famous for his 'rivers of blood' campaign against immigration) at a gig in Birmingham.' (Huddle 2004)

Outraged at not only Clapton's speech but also the fact that it was all the more disgusting because he had his first hit with a cover of reggae star Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff" (Clapton 1974), Huddle and his friend Red Saunders 'wrote a letter to the *New Musical Express* and signed it'. They 'finished the letter by saying that [they] were launching a movement called Rock Against Racism (RAR), and anyone outraged should write to us and join.' (Huddle 2004)

Hundreds wrote, 'but what really propelled it into what became a mass movement was the explosion of punk' (Huddle 2004), although it wasn't just about music. Huddle notes that

What also gave RAR the political context to become much bigger was the establishment of the Anti Nazi League in 1977. Together the ANL and RAR were able to build a really

mass movement against the Nazis. The carnival in Victoria Park with the Clash, Tom Robinson and Steel Pulse attracted 85,000, and received fantastic coverage in NME. Twenty five thousand came to the Northern Carnival in Manchester, which had The Buzzcocks, Graham Parker and the Rumour, and Misty in Roots. The Brockwell Park event with Elvis Costello and Aswad had 100,000, and 26,000 heard Aswad and The Specials in Leeds. (Huddle 2004)

In addition to the big events mentioned above, there were also local gigs, stickers, posters and placards, rallies and marches. It was a long way from Trafalgar Square to Victoria Park, and the march went through areas that were considered NF strongholds at the time, and verbal abuse and fighting ensued. [3]

Syd Shelton joined RAR in early 1977. Both of the books being reviewed contain photographs 'produced for and about' the organisation, work which Carol Tulloch calls 'a socialist act'. 'His contribution to RAR was to be on the London committee, to create graphic material with other RAR members such as the RAR publication "Temporary Hoarding", posters, badges and his photography' (Tulloch 2022: 9). The photographs themselves, gathered up for publication here, 'enables us to feel the ferocity of cultural difference being hammered out on Britain's streets', and mark 'an intriguing, fragile and volatile political movement that literally changed the world' (Sealy 2022: 11).

But one thing RAR wasn't, and that Shelton's photos bear witness to, is po-faced or dull. Shelton himself says that he 'like[s] to think that RAR had more in common with the Dadists [sic] in Zurich than a political party' and notes that 'the other thing that was really important was, as David Widgery said brilliantly, "The great thing about RAR was it's a way of having a revolution without stopping the party."' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 11)

Part of that ability to have fun and party, in addition to the music, was that RAR was 'very much a collective', 'a collective of activists' where there was 'an argument constantly going on' (Shelton 2022: 16). Shelton extends that idea of dialogue to how he thinks about photography as a relationship, 'the conversation you have, visual conversation often, not necessarily speaking, the conversation between me and the subject.' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 17) He also notes that 'for a few short years there was an incredible empowerment' and that his 'photographs of this period are about my life as well as about the subject's life' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 16)

The RAR team at the time of course, 'had no idea of either its significance historically or how much effect it was having on people. [...] we didn't have time to stand back and assess it in anyway at all.' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 16) Now, however, we can; this is history that is more relevant than ever as racism and intolerance resurface. Shelton notes that 'thirty five years later we look at the images in a very different way and many of the photographs in the book never saw the light of day in the 1970s' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 16), whilst Paul Gilroy declares the images are the product of 'nostalgia-free lenses' (Gilroy 2022: 21) and that 'Shelton's archive is also a means by which to grasp the strategic significance of anti-racism and to understand its value as both a substantive political disposition and a grounded philosophical framework.' (Gilroy 2022: 22)

Although '[r]acism has changed and yet remains with us', these photographs offer 'expanded conceptions of what comprises authentic politics and of where cultural factors have decisively shaped important outcomes.' (Gilroy 2022: 22) The images are themselves political, documenting a period when '[a]morphous, generalized dissent started to assume solid shapes. It became recognisable as more than trivial and ephemeral. Anti-racism could supply the futures that were being denied by bleak historical circumstances.' (Gilroy 2022: 22)

Even though it defeated the National Front, RAR didn't stop Thatcher coming to power or the rise of neo-liberalism, 'Shelton's images conjure up a rebel history that enriches analysis of Britain's class struggles and socialist movements.' (Gilroy 2022: 22) Or, as Shelton himself puts it, 'I'd like people to see hope. I'd like them to see that Black and white youth did have a vision for a better way of living in this country and that we could actually change things.' (Phillips/Shelton 2022: 18)

The Café Royal book is an exquisitely produced black and white booklet that mostly features musicians in action. In between Paul Simonon of the Clash playing to the crowd on the front cover and a thoughtful Dennis Brown in Berry Street Studios on the back, we find Elvis Costello, the Barry Forde Band, Misty in Roots, The Beat, a distant shot over the crowd of the Tom Robinson Band, Leslie Woods from the Au Pairs, Stiff Little Fingers, a puzzled looking Jimmy Pursey, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon backstage, Fergul Sharkey, Skully Roots, Ranking Roger, The Ruts, The Specials, Pete Townsend, The Clash (again!), Generation X and Sham 69, Aswad and The Members. And across the centre double page spread is Tom Robinson on stage at Victoria Park, dressed in his own band t-shirt, hands raised to the huge crowd. It's an iconic image, and a reminder that it wasn't just racism RAR were fighting, it was any discrimination based on difference. It was quite a statement when the majority of people at Victoria Park sang 'Glad to be Gay' at the top of their voices.

The Rare Bird book is more substantial, has those contextualising essays I've quoted from above, and feels very different. It's expansive, wide-ranging and contextualises the activities of RAR and the Anti-Nazi League with photographs of the crowd, graffiti, the streets, shops and the semi-derelict or abandoned places where kids or lovers hung out. There's attitude, posing and anger; barbed wire and stray dogs, unloved blocks of flats, and people chilling and drinking. It's odd to be reminded of how we all dressed back then, how most people still had longish hair and wore flares, and that punks, skins and Rastas were minority presences in the overall scheme of things, even when it came to youth subcultures and fashion.

I loved living in London in the late 70s. It was vibrant, energetic and possible to live cheaply, go to loads of gigs and the cinema, despite strikes, blackouts and the frequent sense of not always suppressed anger and violence. Urban decay, failing social and business infrastructures, and poverty hadn't got in the way of new music, in fact it helped facilitate it; and young people seemed both politically aware and active. And 'RAR was using the simple but explosive idea that by bringing Black and White musicians together to challenge Britain's default racism, we could dream to change the world by using Music and Politics to fight Racism.' (Saunders 2022: 185) Perhaps it's time to be inspired again and try to change the world once more?

## NOTES

[1] The full text of Powell's speech, along with a recording of it, is available as part of the online documentation from the *Dispatches: Society* episode 'Immigration: The Inconvenient Truth' (*Dispatches: Society* 2008).

[2] See 'The "Great Replacement" Theory, Explained', (Anon 2021).

[3] Alan Miles' Rock Against Racism documentary, *Who Shot the Sheriff* includes footage from the London rally, march and the Victoria Park carnival, as well as other events, along with interviews with Red Saunders, Roger Huddle and many others (Miles 2005).

## REFERENCES

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